

# Sri Lankan Student Learns Business Savvy

**COLOMBO, Sri Lanka**—Although Shiraz Thowfeek’s father nearly went broke selling tires, Shiraz learned in high school how to turn the tire company into a thriving business. U.S. support for high school business classes helped Thowfeek and thousands of other Sri Lankan students prepare to compete in the marketplace.

At one point after his father’s five shops failed, Thowfeek could not even afford to ride the school bus and walked the three miles to school.

Six years later, Thowfeek, 22, sits behind his father’s old desk and is the boss of General Automotives Trading Company. His father serves as his advisor.

Thowfeek credits much of his success to skills he acquired during his last two years at high school through the Young Entrepreneurs Sri Lanka (YESL) program, a USAID-funded affiliate of Junior Achievement International that runs 112 such programs worldwide.

The YESL program fosters “can do” attitudes, entrepreneurial savvy, and a solid understanding of modern business and marketing principles.

Since 1998, USAID has helped the program reach more than 20,000 students at 193 schools throughout the southern, central, and western regions.

YESL is popular among students because of its interactive teaching approach, use of information technology, and relevance to the world outside the classroom.

IBM Country Manager Kavan Ratnayake, who sponsors a program in his hometown, said the classes teach English-language competency as well as business skills.

Topics include teamwork, saving money, the roles of individuals and families in the economy, career opportunities, personal economics, enterprise in action, the international marketplace, the economics of staying in school, and job-hunting skills.

Students also establish and run small businesses themselves. They sell stock, elect officers, produce and market products and services, keep records, and conduct stockholder meetings. When the program is over, they liquidate their assets and usually return a profit.

When he was in high school, Thowfeek helped run “Big Fresh,” subcontracting with local homemakers to provide buns, rolls, cake, and toffee for special events at the school and in the community. When the school cafeteria complained it was losing business, “the principal supported us,” said Thowfeek. “He said, ‘Give the students better stuff, and you’ll have more business.’”

“Business is all about relationships, trust,



Michael DeSisti, USAID  
*Shiraz Thowfeek learned how to run his father’s tire business profitably with the help of the Young Entrepreneurs Sri Lanka program.*

and a good name,” says Thowfeek. “If I treat my employees and customers well, I’ll do good business. The bank is my partner. So are the income tax people. I’m frank with everybody. If I have a problem, we talk about

it. They appreciate that and try to help.” ★

*By Micheal DeSisti, USAID/Sri Lanka.*  
**www.usaid.gov: Keyword Sri Lanka**